

# Kadahilanan, Kaakuhan, and Kaunawaan: Yielding the Unheard Narratives of Student Atheists in a Science High School

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## ABSTRACT

*Atheist is someone who does not subscribe to the belief in a higher power, making it a somewhat controversial stance due to the prevailing religious practices. Atheists often encounter various challenges, including homophobia, misogyny, and other doctrines preached by the church, within their immediate social circles. Despite these negative experiences, the persistent appeal of atheism, driven by the secular movement, continues to attract individuals. This research delves into the experiences of students attending a science high school who identify as atheists, aiming to collect and analyze their personal narratives. The study adopts a qualitative approach with a focus on phenomenology, emphasizing the participants' stories and lived experiences. Data was gathered through interviews with atheist students from the Philippine Science High School Ilocos Region Campus, conducted both online and in-person, and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The data revealed three major themes: Reasons (kadahilanan), Challenges (kaakuhan), and Understand (kaunawaan). Within the Motivation theme, five subthemes emerged: non-religious upbringing, rational thinking, the rejection of hypocrisy, and resistance to bigotry. Similarly, the Acceptance theme included five subthemes: individuality, open-mindedness, misconceptions, pressure to conform to religious practices, and social antagonization. Finally, the Understand theme encompassed four subthemes: involvement in the atheist movement, forming supportive bonds, dealing with mass religious activities, and addressing curriculum-related issues. Based on the collected data, there is a need to strengthen policies that promote the expression of diverse beliefs, including the practice of atheism.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A person who does not believe in or worship any god and does not affiliate with any religion can be considered an atheist (Neilsen, 2022). Currently, there is a gradual improvement in understanding this group, perhaps due to the more secular trends of the modern world. However, there still remain corners of the world where minds are closed to atheists. Most notably, these are countries that remain highly religious, such as the Philippines (Schiavone & Gervais, 2017). It cannot be denied that religiosity is deeply ingrained in Filipino culture. According to the Harvard Divinity School (2022), this is a result of Spain's long colonial rule over the country. Over the course of 333 years, most Filipinos completely abandoned their indigenous paganism and embraced foreign Catholicism. Even though the Church and State have long been separated, the influence of religion still persists in modern Philippines, affecting everything from the simple workings of a family to the overall political climate of the nation. As mentioned by Schiavone and Gervais (2017), the level of religiosity in a country is proportional to the closed-mindedness toward certain issues. Some of the consequences include radical church teachings promoting



homophobia or hostility towards members of the LGBTQ+ community (Callaghan & van Leent, 2019), misogyny or discrimination against women (Beattie, 2018; Hogan, 2015; Reisinger, 2022), among others. These issues were even worse in earlier times (Greenberg, 1982), and their effects on society persist, though not to the same extreme extent.

The same holds true for atheists. However, unlike other marginalized groups, atheists do not experience the same advocacy efforts made for women and LGBTQ+ individuals, such as RA 9262 (Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act, 2004) and the SOGIESC Equality Bill (Abad, 2022). And, as mentioned earlier, the lack of research on atheists is exacerbated by the religious nature of the Philippines. While this is a deficiency, it also means there is a larger research gap that can be addressed. Like other discriminated groups, it is important to understand the roots of atheism not just for the sake of understanding, but also to identify shortcomings in the institutions they have left behind (i.e., the Church), which may serve as a basis for improving religious institutions.

The focus of the study originated from students of a science high school, following the trend of increasing atheism in scientific institutions (Rogińska, 2018; Simpson & Rios, 2018). It was ideal to select students as the study's foundation to emphasize the difference between classical religious mindsets from older generations and the current secular mindset among the youth.

In the context of the Philippine Science High School-Ilocos Region Campus, it is noticed that many students do not believe in religion and God, considering themselves as atheists. Because of this, researchers were motivated to study the experiences of atheist students. This is important in order to understand the reasons and challenges they face in their daily lives. This study is also important in developing policies and programs for inclusive education.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed to explore and analyze the collective experiences and narratives regarding the beliefs and lifestyles of atheist students at the Philippine Science High School - Ilocos Region Campus during the academic year 2022-2023. Furthermore, efforts were made to clarify the following specific objectives: to identify the demographic characteristics of the participants; to develop themes that encapsulate the experiences of atheist students; and to create a simulacrum that elucidates the experiences of atheist students.

## **2. METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This research employed a qualitative approach. Phenomenology was utilized in the research, which was compared to the studies of Burchett & Glanzer (2020) and Mueller (2012). This research design aims to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Using this approach, the collective experiences regarding beliefs and lifestyles of atheist students were analyzed and understood, along with the interpretations and meanings they associate with these experiences (Galdonez et al., 2022). In phenomenology, recurrent statements or data points from participants' experiences were singled out and organized into categories to grasp their significance within the data. These categorized statements underwent review and re-categorization based on their shared characteristics, prior to being aligned with the participants' viewpoints. Thematic analysis was employed to detect patterns and themes within the data, which were subsequently regarded as reflective of the participants' perspectives.

### **Population and Sampling**

The study took place at the Philippine Science High School - Ilocos Region Campus, where students from different grade levels during the academic year 2022-2023 were involved. The researchers gathered

data from students who believe in and live according to atheism. Targeted sampling was used by the researchers to identify participants in the study to gather comprehensive and relevant information from the target population. Accordingly, eleven students from various grade levels of PSHS-IRC were involved in the study, with four from the twelfth grade, two from the eleventh grade, one from the tenth grade, two from the ninth grade, one from the eighth grade, and one from the seventh grade. Additionally, atheism is an issue that may be related to societal stigma in our country, hence targeted sampling was an appropriate method for data collection (Watters & Biernacki, 1989).

### **Research Instrument**

The researchers developed an interview consent form outlining the purpose of the research and the participants' responsibilities. Additionally, the researchers created an interview guide to explore the meaningful experiences of the students. The composition of the interview guide underwent critical screening to ensure the appropriateness of the content. Moreover, the screening process was conducted to identify and test the researchers' assumptions before obtaining accurate and sufficient information for the study (Lindberg et al., 2019). This was conducted through semi-structured interviews.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Method**

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researchers drafted letters to authorities to address ethical considerations. During the interviews, researchers introduced themselves and provided details on the study's objectives, the scope of participants' responsibilities, the confidentiality of data, and permissions for additional interview tools such as recording and transcription. The interviews lasted for at least an hour to ensure data saturation and were held at the Philippine Science High School-Ilocos Region Campus during participants' free time. The participants' were asked for their consent about the recording of the interviews conducted. Subsequently, the gathered data from the interviews were transcribed and coded, then organized into appropriate categories based on observed themes. Reflexive Thematic Analysis, a method that acknowledges researchers' experiences and knowledge on the subject, influencing the interpretation of observed patterns for data analysis, was utilized by the researchers (Hayfield & Terry, 2020). To ensure validity and reliability of findings, the identified themes underwent external validation using the critical friend technique. The critical friend technique serves to enhance the validity and reliability of the themes identified. In employing this technique, researchers sought out an individual external to the research group, possessing expertise in the topic and qualitative research, to review and provide feedback on the transcribed interviews and formulated themes. Any necessary corrections suggested by the critical friend were carefully examined and integrated to ensure the validity and reliability of the results (Galdonez, 2024; McNiff, 2002).

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the research, the experiences of eleven students at the Philippine Science High School - Ilocos Region Campus as atheists were gathered and examined. The students who participated in the study had the following characteristics: one male and ten females; four of them were from the twelfth grade, two from the eleventh grade, one from the tenth grade, two from the ninth grade, one from the eighth grade, and one from the seventh grade. The gathered data were analyzed and interpreted. From the analyzed data, primary themes regarding the experiences of atheist students in a science high school were discovered, namely: factors, convictions, and understandings.

### **Participant Demographics**

In identifying the participants, it was found that most students in higher grades were more open in their beliefs, and atheistic students were more noticeable within their group. However, identifying

participants in lower grades was challenging, and most of them believed in God. Belief in God is deeply ingrained and provides individuals with a framework for grappling with profound questions such as the meaning of life and death. Hence, breaking away from the accustomed beliefs, especially when they have not been exposed to concepts beyond religion that can be found in a science high school, is not easy. Moreover, students in higher grades were more exposed to scientific perspectives, which became a reason for some atheists to renounce religion. It was also found in the study that atheist participants began questioning what they learned in the church during their youth or mid-to-late teenage years upon entering high school and college (Aldama, 2021; LeDrew, 2013).

### **Kadahilanan (Reasons) in Students' Atheism**

Constructive influences that led to students' atheism through the advancement of atheistic ideas were observed. The collected excerpts were divided into two themes: Non-practice and Rationalism and three themes emerged covering negative influences: Obsession, Hypocrisy, and Bigotry.

**Non-practice.** The foundation of a child's moral values and customs is formed within the smallest unit of society, the family. As they grow older, their capacity for self-learning expands. Many factors influence their actions and beliefs, such as the attitudes or habits in their environment, not limited to their parents. For instance, regarding their economic status in childhood, it reflects the current state of an individual's ability to control things when faced with uncertain situations (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014). From the interviews, for example, in the excerpt "*my family wasn't that religious either*," a secular socialization was inferred, or the overall disregard for religion or religious practices of a religion in a child's upbringing. This led to characteristics that prompted them to discover their own views on religion. In comparison to religious socialization, religious trauma may be argued due to hypocrisy, contradictions in established ideas, sexual abuse, and other factors that led to the identification of some participants as atheists or non-practicing (Lampert, 2019). Alongside secular socialization is the proliferation of free exploration in religion, often mistaken for direct opposition or contradiction to anything related to religion (Thiessen, 2016).

**Rationalism.** Various manifestations of rationalism were observed in the interviews. Regarding the natural curiosity of ignorance, participants critically analyzed the shared readings in the classroom, established moral directions, and other materials involved in a religious context using their own understanding and reasoning. The participants' critical examination of these texts reflects Force's (1989) analysis of biblical criticism as a turning away from recognized and accepted biblical standards. One participant said, "*I was really interested in, uhm, the creation of all things, and I wondered if it's scientifically proven too*," indicating the significant influence of extensive and independent online exploration, such as on social media platforms, to address meaningful religious questions. The use of social media platforms, as mentioned in the interview excerpt "*Mostly, it's internet because during that time, it was the pandemic, and the pandemic*," demonstrates the various effects on the psychological state of young people and can be either positive, where the platform becomes a support system, or negative, due to the widespread debate or bullying (Keles et al., 2020). Furthermore, their experience and foundation in science were noted as factors in the contextual investigation of events related to a religious context. In addition to constructive influences, there were negative influences that pushed participants towards atheism. These are the influences that distance participants from religion. Some of these include the family's influence and the church's influence on the participants. One reason for some participants' atheism is the experiences involving their families. According to some participants, the obsession with religion and hypocrisy, contrary to what is taught in religion, are reasons for their disbelief in any god. The church, where people come together to perform religious activities, is also a factor. Although the church's

intentions are good, some of them become reasons for the disbelief of other research participants due to hypocrisy and the bigotry sometimes seen in those who oversee and attend the church.

**Obsession.** Excessive devotion to religion by some individuals can be a reason for atheism because it can be suffocating and limiting to an individual's desired actions. Additionally, religious obsession can affect people's daily lives by hindering normal activities. *"My dad serves the church, and then he's like, he can't live unless he reads the book every day,"* said one interviewee. From this statement, it can be observed that their parent is very strict when it comes to faith, to the extent that their daily lives depend on religion. This is echoed in the studies by Bailey (2020) and Matsuura (2020), which suggest that the obsession with religious activities and the concept of godly morality can affect a person's life because those experiencing it tend to be critical when it comes to actions not in line with the bible. Such cases can reach the point of harming oneself and others because their beliefs are imposed on others.

**Hypocrisy.** Another reason for some study participants is the hypocrisy of some members of their family. Their statements indicate that despite being close to religion, their family's actions do not align with what is stated in the bible. The church, too, can be considered a place where goodness is taught, as seen in the bible. However, it is also one of the reasons why some participants are atheists because some churchgoers and leaders are hypocritical. According to Rainer (2020), the church often imposes various rules to be followed by people, but some of them do not have a basis in the bible and are more detrimental to others. Furthermore, some only become religious when necessary, which is why their teachings are not fully embraced based on their actions and how they treat others. One interviewee said, *"Sometimes the teachings in church seem outdated, and it's easy to misinterpret what the Bible says, so it's hard to believe."* From this statement, it can be noticed that some teachings in the church are not up-to-date and do not keep pace with the ongoing progress of the world, leading to misinterpretations that are more harmful. According to McDaniels (2019), the church is gradually becoming outdated because of teachings that cause harm to those who are not very religious and do not fit into the identities mentioned in the bible. Because of this, the hypocrisy of some church members is more evident, sometimes resulting in the atheism of their peers.

**Bigotry.** Excessive devotion to religion, where a person's actions become irrational, can be called bigotry. Some religious people become closed-minded to new concepts like LGBTQIA+ individuals, which is why some study participants deviate from religion. Religion is associated with discriminating against members of communities not recognized by the church, such as LGBTQIA+. For instance, one respondent stated, *"religion is the biggest reason why people don't come out as homosexual."* This is supported by the study of Schawadel and Sandstrom (2019), which stated that homosexuals are more likely to be atheists compared to heterosexuals because of the discrimination they face due to their nonconforming sexual identity. Additionally, Cohen (2023) stated that opposition to homosexuals is still prevalent among religious people because of the conservative teachings in the church. Consequently, some people become closed-minded to change brought about by the increasing freedom to express new concepts like LGBTQIA+. While kindness to others is one of the teachings of the church, some of its members cause harm to others who do not belong to the concepts found in the bible. For this reason, some people distance themselves from religion because they do not see the truthfulness in the actions of those belonging to a religion.

### Kaakuhan (Challenges) Faced by Atheist Students

According to the participants, being an atheist has opened up a new perspective on themselves and their environment. They liken being atheist to being freer compared to those who adhere to a religion.

**Self-perspective.** One of the things participants have learned is having a better relationship with themselves because they believe that what they do is for themselves and not mandated to follow. One participant mentioned, "*I will do this for myself*" or "*I will do this because it's good for me and good for others but not for the Lord. So, also for myself.*" They develop a stronger belief in themselves, resulting in self-love. As one participant said, "When I went through a tough time, praying to God to help me any chance I get. In the end, nothing happened and when I stopped believing in him and started believing in myself, things took a turn for a better." However, prioritizing their own needs and desires leads to their happiness. As a result, their work becomes productive and good. This is similar to the study of Wiseman & Young (2014), where individuals reporting as atheist/agnostic are positively associated with productive entrepreneurship. Furthermore, their mention of having their own characteristics because they believe that people are made to be different, not the same.

**Perspective on their environment.** According to those interviewed, being irreligious may lead to more critical thinking as decisions are not based on any dogma or doctrine. Instead, their thinking is based on science and empirical evidence. However, it does not mean that being religious leads to a lack of critical thinking, as one participant said, "*to be skeptical about things, and, um, different sources, not just... if you see something and it's backed up by somewhat trusted sources, then that's it. So, also look for other sources of information.*" A religious person can also be critical and analytical in their beliefs. They also learn that not everyone agrees with their beliefs and we need to accept and respect their opinions and beliefs. Respecting other religions is not only showing kindness to others but also showing openness and forgiveness. Interviewees believe that being open-minded and accepting different perspectives is important for a broader understanding and interaction with others.

**Freedom.** According to the interviews, they compare being atheist to being free in thought and expression because it allows for a broader perspective and deeper understanding of a subject. When there are no mandates or prohibited actions, they are not tied to rules or directives, and they are freer to express their thoughts and ideas. Freedom in action provides an opportunity to demonstrate broader capabilities and show their potential based on a statement from an interview, "*The quote 'I am the master of my own fate' is true in the end, even without divine intervention, you can still overcome obstacles, and achieve goals you set for yourself.*" However, they believe that this freedom should not be abused because there are still rules to follow and laws to respect. Atheists show a moderate level of significance. Typically, most atheists have a particular commitment to self-knowledge, freedom, knowledge, individualism, and comfort (Schnell & Keenan, 2011).

Negative experiences of being atheist were also identified in the interviews. These include people's misconceptions about atheists, forced religiosity despite their beliefs, and negative portrayal.

**Misconceptions.** From the interviews, participants mentioned what people said to them when they revealed they were atheists, showing that people do not understand atheism or sometimes assume they worship abhorrent figures. According to one participant, "*I need to explain further because really, when you're religious, and you haven't heard those terms, you'll really just think of what you're used to first.*" Another participant mentioned, "*I had a batchmate before, and she asked me, 'ah, what religion are you? And I told her, 'atheist.' And she said to me, 'Ah, do you worship Satan?'*" It cannot be denied that in a religious country like the Philippines, not believing in God is uncommon, so it is not surprising that atheism is a concept that is not accepted (Brillantes & Rodenas, 2022). The statement in the preface mentioned by a member of UPAC that atheists are considered bad while worshipers are good (Lanuza, 2012). These misconceptions also lead atheists to hide their atheism because of questions like assuming they worship abhorrent figures mentioned by one participant. This aligns with the experiences gathered in the study of Burchett & Glanzer (2020) where participants often relate to common beliefs that they feel

do not represent their beliefs. An atheist participant in the study expressed concern that people might only ask about their lack of belief in God, even if it hurts or does not represent a person's belief.

**Forced religiosity.** Most of the interviewees mentioned their experiences of having to attend school worship services or praying in a subject. According to one participant, "*There was an activity and some very atheist were forced to attend there, and it's very religious.*" It was also mentioned in the interview that: "*It also depends on the teachers, like that, because sometimes the subjects also have prayers.*" Forcing religiosity or integrating religion into school activities marginalizes atheists. Teachers' assumption that everyone worships God and not including the perspective of atheism in the curriculum will continue to marginalize atheist students (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Forced religiosity can also be considered a form of discrimination and aligns with the experiences examined in the study of Hammer et al. (2012). These experiences include being subjected to undesirable prayers and the neglect of their request to make burial non-religious, and the compulsory swearing to God before being allowed to join an organization. These experiences disrespect their lack of belief in God.

**Antagonization.** Atheists were identified in the interviews as portrayed as bad people because of their lack of belief in God or their disagreement with their lack of belief. According to one participant, "*When they hear that you're atheist, you really experience discrimination that if you don't believe in their belief, they will really seclude you.*" Another participant also mentioned, "*So, if he finds out that I don't believe, probably, he would judge me as a bad person because of my belief instead of my actions.*" This can again be related to the religiosity of the country. Belief in God is anchored in our country. Atheism is uncommon and only a small percentage of atheists in the country, so being atheist is contrary to the country's standards (Aldama, 2021; Brillantes & Rodenas, 2022). These statements also align with the experiences of atheists in the study of Burchett & Glanzer (2020). Like the study participants, atheists also expressed fear when they found out that they do not believe in God because it may affect their status in society. This is because they may no longer be liked or seen as bad people. This also aligns with the experiences discovered in Aldama's study (2021) where some participants chose to hide their atheism from their relatives because it would hurt their feelings.

### **Kaunawaan (Understanding) the Situation of Atheist Students**

Nevertheless, one of the discussions is how to improve the treatment of atheists in the chosen school. It also discussed where atheist students are heading and what suggestions they have to achieve an inclusive school. The scope of the atheist community was first discussed, followed by the suggestions they propose to address problems related to their beliefs.

**Community Formation.** According to the participants, atheists can be considered a community because they are a group of people who can come together due to similarities. However, they cannot be compared to religious communities whose gathering encompasses many aspects of their lives. In their responses, two reasons or themes were gathered: the prevalence of atheism and the camaraderie among students. Atheist students may feel isolated or misunderstood in environments where religious beliefs are predominant. Community formation begins by acknowledging and validating the experiences and identities of atheist students. By recognizing their shared identity as individuals who do not adhere to religious beliefs, a sense of belonging can be cultivated (Boyd, 2015).

**Prevalence of atheism.** Compared to before, research on atheists and the differences among religions are increasing. This is due to the continuous rise of secularism worldwide (Coleman et al., 2015; Froese, 2004). Indeed, in the Philippines as a whole, many are not yet in favor of complete secularization of the country, given the continued strong influence of the Church, which still reaches into politics. For example, the issue of the Reproductive Health Law was prolonged in Congress because of the Church's disagreement, or the continued discrimination and mistreatment of self-proclaimed atheists (Buckley,

2017; Canceran, 2016). However, according to the participants, many in their school are recognized as atheists. It was also said in an interview, "*There really are atheists in the batch [...].*" It was also mentioned that, "*We are very open in what we believe in.*" Since the students come from a science high school, such statements are consistent with the findings of Lynn et al. (2009), Gervais (2011), and Norenzayan (2014) that there is a negative correlation between belief in God and being scientific. Furthermore, discrimination and disdain towards atheists decrease when there is seen to be a plurality within that group or when the majority of the community is seen to be open-minded toward them. There is also a decreasing discrimination against atheists, and as a result, more people openly admit their disbelief, due to the increasing trust in the said group. According to studies, anger or resentment towards atheists stems from distrust or fear that they will undermine the sociological structure of religious institutions (Gervais, 2013; LaBouff & Ledoux, 2016; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013).

**Camaraderie.** From the interviews, it is considered that there is indeed a community of atheists, but it is not very significant in everyday life. According to one participant, "*But outside that [telling atheist jokes], we don't gather and say, 'Ah, I don't want to go to church.*" Many of those interviewed also said that they do not interact much with students from other levels, as well as with other atheists: "*I only interact with a few so [...] my thinking is biased because [...] I only interact with Grade 12.*" Those statements are consistent with the findings of Guenther (2014). According to them, atheists also do not actively participate in organizations related to disbelief. In a survey by Langston et al. (2015), the first reason why atheists do not join atheist groups is that their disbelief in God is not a significant part of their self-identity. According to Quack et al. (2019), the lack of nonreligious community is due to the differences within the group; there are skeptics, there are those who are indifferent to religion, there are agnostics, and there are open atheists.

### Proposals from Student Atheists

From the discussed problems, the student participants were also asked to provide appropriate solutions. Their responses fall into two categories: non-compulsory attendance in religious activities and curriculum changes anchored in religion.

**Non-compulsory attendance in mass or prayer.** Non-compulsory attendance in masses and prayers can be seen as a solution to the problems faced by students in a science high school because it makes the school more inclusive for atheists in this way. This is also according to the study participants who experienced the said problem: "*[...] basically they can do that [religious activities] without imposing them on the students.*" Tension has long been brewing between different religions in a school. Involved in this are what version of the Bible will be used in teaching children, how Muslims or students of other religions than the majority Catholic will be taught, and where non-believers will fit in (Mitchell, 2020). According to Nobakht (2018), compulsory religiosity increases children's inclination to disaffiliate from religion. However, it was seen in the statements that there is already a way for atheists not to attend worship services. "*[...] during mass, you can go to the library if you don't have any belief, right?*" However, it was also noted that the policy of allowing non-believers to stay in the library during religious activities is not always followed; many still ask if one truly does not believe, which can be harmful to those who are not open or closeted atheists. Furthermore, there are days when students silently comply with their compulsory attendance in said worship services. The participants want to bring back and improve the said practice, "*Well for starters, maybe make the joining of worship services non-mandatory again.*"

**Curriculum.** "*[I hope] religion is separated from our school curriculum, let's say in ValEd (Values Education) classes,*" was the response of one interviewee. From the participants, there are subjects mostly discussing Christian beliefs. However, according to them, it is better if bias in religion is completely removed from the curriculum. They encourage the adoption of programs not centered on one belief,

which is sometimes demonstrated in students' curricula. This is consistent with the findings of Strhan & Shillitoe (2022), who stated that less religious children are uncomfortable with discussions about religion. According to their gathered information, those children are more interested in studying more complex social issues than moral teachings that can be done without mentioning any specific religion. According to one participant, "*[I hope there's] added teaching in ValEd about inclusivity in beliefs or lack thereof.*" Nevertheless, many also said that aside from bias in religion, the school remains inclusive and secular when looking at the curriculum of some subjects. This is consistent with what Bråten & Everington (2019) stated that, in today's time, education would be better if bias in religion were reduced. This is due to the open-mindedness brought about by the disappearance of curricula from the limits set by religion in texts and even in ways of thinking.

### Study Simulacrum

From the gathered data and themes, the researchers have constructed a representation or simulacrum that could symbolize the experience.



Figure 1. Open-Top Hourglass Experience of Student Atheists

Three dimensions of the past, present, and future are seen, with an hourglass, open at the top, being the most fitting symbol for the reasons, experiences, and understanding of being atheist among the student participants. The accumulated sand at the bottom of the hourglass symbolizes the positive and negative reasons for the students' atheism. This forms their foundation in disbelief and maintains the overall structure of the hourglass. Adapting to the current experiences of atheism among the students is represented in the middle part. The narrow path of sand symbolizes the often unfavorable treatment of atheists along with the struggles they have realized. Lastly, the top draws attention to the understanding of atheists. The open top symbolizes the openness of atheists to new ideas as well as their endless desire for an inclusive society.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the gathered data, the reasons cited in interviews for being atheist revolve around their experiences with religion, family, and science. They realized that belief in a religion or god leads to

hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, and differing perspectives on science. Additionally, their negative experiences as atheists further motivated them to strengthen their beliefs. Nevertheless, being atheist did not hinder them from having a good relationship with themselves and others. They learned to rely on themselves, leading to increased productivity and self-confidence.

### Recommendations

Based on the observed results, strengthening policies to accommodate various religions, including atheism, is a crucial step towards broader understanding and respect for different beliefs and cultures. These policies should involve allowing freedom to attend religious services in schools and eliminating the centralization of a single belief in the curriculum and programs. Training and programs for teachers and students can also be implemented to foster open-mindedness towards atheists. Through these measures, openness to different beliefs can be demonstrated, and greater unity can be achieved despite differences.

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